

Can you read お酒です?

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Akko Takamiya

Tour Guide-Interpreter / Interpreter

Graduated from Sophia University, worked as a system designer of school computer networks at Fuji Electric group company for five years. Passing the national exam of interpreter tour guide, started tourism business then extended it into international business management service to assist tourists and corporate visitors from overseas.

Website: <http://deartravelers.com>

「お酒です」 is one of the most popular sign you find in convenience stores, meaning 'alcoholic drinks'. If you don't understand this, you might mistakenly buy an alcoholic beverage instead of orange juice, because they are so much alike, except for this tiny sign written in Japanese. And it actually happened that one of my customers gave a canned vodka to his teenage son...!

Japan is Japanese based, I mean, everything is written and spoken in Japanese and people manage only with Japanese. Today English is highly valued as an international language but still, people who can speak it at certain level are minor, and information are usually provided only in Japanese. This is something I was not aware before I started my job which is to assist customers from overseas during their stay in Japan, and it seems I'm not the only one who's surprised, for I once had a visitor from overseas who yelled at an international exhibition, 'This is an INTERNATIONAL event. Why don't people speak English and I need an interpreter all the time?'.

Actually, quite many people ask me this question. And I always answer back like, 'I guess it's because Japanese language is too difficult. My eight year old daughter's got Kanji homework every day, saying she's got to learn 200 characters in her

grade, and next year another 200, which makes no room for English. So maybe it's faster if you learn some Japanese. Yes, you can, and it actually is interesting.'

And they do. Since most of my customers are visiting Japan on business, they come regularly, like every year, or every couple of months, then start to get familiar with Kanjis such as 品川 or 枝豆.

Can you guess what they mean? The first one with three boxes and three lines means 'Shinagawa', the name of a big city in Tokyo. Easy, isn't it? The next one stands for Edamame beans, popular Japanese side dish you can order at Japanese restaurants or sake bars.

Besides, pictures helps greatly. My customers get excited to see large picture menus at casual sake bars, colorful advertisements and product packages with characters and images as if they are speaking to us, and especially those 3D artworks you can find in front of restaurants...the food samples. They are not only attractive but also helpful when we have foreign visitors. Furthermore, they can easily be spread to overseas by emails or via Facebook, as people tend to take photos especially when they travel. I once took a photo of my customers standing in front of dozens of soft cream samples in Asakusa. As you see, pictures are international.



Left : Picture menus provided at many sake bars make it easy to order dishes
 Right : Alcohol beverage with Japanese sign saying 'This is an alcoholic drink'

Most of my customers visit Japan on business. They are well traveled, very international, and like to be efficient. Normally they stay in Tokyo for a couple of days or sometimes for a week, at the same hotel. Their main workplace is central Tokyo with lots of business meetings there, and with some day trips to other business cities such as Nagoya or Osaka. I always recommend that they should spend at least one night there, preferably in a nice Ryokan Japanese inn and enjoy hot springs or traditional temples and gardens, but their answer is always, 'Maybe next time'. They are super busy people, with no time to spent for that. Also they don't prefer to pack their suitcases (which are usually huge) and move to other hotels. So, no sight-see, straight back home or move to the next destination right after 'mission complete'.

But during that limited time it still is possible to have some fun, especially when they dine out after work. There, casual sake bars (izakaya) can often be the best choice, for people can choose many different dishes à la carte, of course with the picture menu with which they can order just by pointing each food! And they are fresh, tasty, and healthy. Popular menus are Sashimi (with extra wasabi!), Sushi, Tofu, Yakisoba noodle, Yakitori

chicken, and of course, cold sake. Taking shoes off, put them in the box, lock it and keep the key card is another adventure, for when they go out, they need to match the number of the key card and the box, which are mostly written in Japanese. What's more wonderful is sometimes waitresses talk to them with a friendly smile, like, 'Where are you from? I am studying English'. This makes them very happy.

After enjoying a sake bar, customers usually stop by a convenience store, to buy bottles of mineral water, or maybe something different. This is again, tricky. Beers are easy. They have signs such as 'Asahi Draft Beer Super Dry' or 'Kirin Free, Alc. 0.00%' in English, very clearly so people understand what's in them. But canned shochus are not. They look exactly like soft drinks. I really hope soon 「お酒です」 will have English translation or clear picture sign of alcohol beside, and until then, I will keep teaching my customers this means 'alcoholic drink', wishing they will enjoy an amazing variety of sake, not only at sake bars, but also at convenience stores, as well.

(Akko Takamiya)

*Original context is available at yamatogokoro.jp/en